CORRESPONDENCE

Correspondents are asked to be brief

Hospital Waiting Lists N. H. Harris, F.R.C.S.	554	Ganglion Cysts of Bones A. W. Fowler, F.R.C.S.	557	Hamster-hair Hypersensitivity K. H. Lim, M.R.C.P.	560
Factors Influencing Return to Work Sir Herbert Seddon, D.M., F.R.C.S.; R. Saunders, F.R.C.S.; M. F. Stranc, F.R.C.S.	554	Submandibular Gland and Lingual Nerve D. H. Patey, F.R.C.S.	558	Hard Water and Cardiovascular Disease S. Shaw, F.R.C.PATH.	561
Sclerosant Injection for Varicose Veins P. G. C. Martin, F.R.C.S., and H. H. G. Eastcott, F.R.C.S.	555	Antileprosy Drugs S. G. Browne, F.R.C.P.	558	Hyposensitization Treatment A. P. Smith, M.R.C.P.	561
Manpower and Financial Incentives J. R. Butler and J. M. Bevan	555	Prophylaxis of Supraventricular Tachycardia A. W. Segal, M.R.C.P.	559	Handicapped Children in Preschool Playgroups Helen L. Stevenson, M.A.; R. E. Faulkner, D.C.H.	561
Pupillary Mobility and Skin Colour A. S. D. Spiers, M.R.A.C.P.	555	Cot Deaths and Deficiency of Vitamin E and Selenium D. F. L. Money, B.V.Sc.	559	Mismatched or Incompatible? G. W. G. Bird, F.R.C.PATH.	562
Crystals in Skeletal Muscle G. H. Hitchings, PH.D.	555	Preclinical Salaries G. W. Atherton, M.B., and others	559	Death in Hospital B. Taylor, M.B.	562
Hypoglycaemia in Infancy and Childhood A. D. Griffiths, M.D.	556	Specimens from the Female Genital Tract S. Selwyn, M.D., and J. K. Oates, F.R.C.P.ED.	559	Hospital-based Social Workers J. A. Harrington, M.D., and P. A. Barker, M.R.C.P.ED.	562
Need for Asylums O. W. S. Fitzgerald, M.D., D.P.M.	556	Diagnosis of Appendicitis R. J. McN. Love, F.R.C.S.	560	Destruction of Case Records P. A. Hill	562
Renal Tubular Acidosis G. A. MacGregor, M.D.	556	Cavernous Chyloangioma of Jejunal Mesentery A. C. Branfoot, F.R.C.S.	560	Vacuum Termination of Pregnancy S. M. Sengupta, M.B., and D. D. Mathews, F.R.C.S.	562
Responsibility of the Scientist S. Bradshaw, M.B.	557	The Lungs in Ankylosing Spondylitis B. A. Scobie, M.R.A.C.P.	560	Chapels of Rest C. Lipp, L.R.C.P.	562
Cervical Cytology Form B. W. Meade, F.R.C.PATH., and M. E. A. Powell, M.R.C.PATH.; R. G. Watson, M.B.	557	Diazoxide and Hypertension L. H. Sevvitt, M.R.C.P., and D. K. Peters, M.R.C.P.	560	The New F.F.R. F. Pygott, D.M.R.E.	562
Virus-free Blood C. H. Beresford, M.R.C.P., and others	557	Anticoagulant Interactions P. F. Cooper, PH.D.	560	Christmas Gifts Fund Appeal Sir Thomas Holmes Sellers, P.R.C.S.	562
Phenformin, Tetracycline, and Lactic Acidosis C. K. Tashima, M.D.	557	Hazards of Colostomy Closure G. T. Watts, F.R.C.S.	560		

Hospital Waiting Lists

SIR,—There are more important reasons why offered beds are wasted other than the one given by Mr. D. P. Choyce (13 November, p. 428). Patients are generally sent for with a maximum of seven days' notice; this is quite inadequate for the mother with young children, or someone with a job. The postal service is such that even with a 3p letter the seven days is reduced to four or five. Patients who have been on a list for months or years may have moved and failed to notify a forwarding address. I do not like the suggestions made by Mr. Choyce, and surely he is aware that computers are by no means infallible—or perhaps he has been luckier than I with his bank statements and tax returns, for example.

There is a very simple solution which I have used successfully at two general hospitals (one teaching) over the last two years, and I commend it to Mr. Choyce and others.

The consultant keeps a diary in his clinic and when he sees patients requiring admission he offers them a date which suits the patient and himself. The name and other details are inserted into the diary. The patient is given the appropriate admission papers which avoids the need to write to the patient. At regular intervals the admission office sends a list of patients to come in to the ward for perhaps a month or more in advance.

On the ward round the consultant will know what beds he requires for the following week. He can then arrange for his discharges on that day when the patients are due to come in. The system must be in the sole charge of the consultant, and it will fail

if these important duties are delegated to the frequently changing junior staff or clerks.

There is no need to have a waiting list, leaving patients in doubt until the last moment as to when they will be admitted. This system has the additional advantage that patients are not invited to come in and then told on arrival to go home as the bed has been taken by an emergency. Furthermore, the hospital does not have to rely on the vagaries of the postal service or the patient notifying a change of address.

Let those who are sceptical try it for a year, but I stress again that the consultant himself must actively control the system, which really involves very little extra work and time.—I am, etc.,

NIGEL H. HARRIS

London W.1

Factors Influencing Return to Work

SIR,—May I make a few (unavoidably belated) comments on the paper by Dr. D. A. Brewerton and Mr. J. W. Daniel (30 October, p. 227)?

For their study of factors influencing return to work patients with severe brachial plexus injuries were most suitable. Either anatomically or functionally many of these unfortunate young men ended up one-armed; major readjustment was necessary. Yet in one way this choice was unfortunate. It is only recently that the dense mist that enshrouded this most complex of all nerve injuries began to lift, and the reluctance of surgeons to make a firm prognosis at an early stage was understandable. However, looking back on the time when, as part of the attack

on this problem, the Royal National Orthopaedic Hospital, in conjunction with Roehampton, established a special clinic for the study of these patients, I am sure our approach to it was too academic. We were so absorbed by investigation, prognosis, and treatment that we gave too little thought to what sort of work was suited to each man's disability and temperament. Dr. Brewerton and Mr. Daniel are right in drawing attention to clinicians', including our own, neglect of resettlement.

This leads to a second topic, the disablement resettlement officers. These men work under the Ministry of Labour, and there are obviously good reasons for this; the Health Department is so satisfied with this arrangement that it will not allow it to be questioned. Yet there are two reasons why it should be. If, as Dr. Brewerton and Mr. Daniel argue, clinicians need stirring up, the chances of this coming about are better if the district rehabilitation officer is in the hospital (he can serve several). Like the medical social worker, he is linked anyway with part of it by the nature of his work. Secondly, the initial steps, especially if a patient with a serious injury is to be tackled early, can be very delicate, and the D.R.O. must be a person, rather than an official, as dedicated to the patients' welfare as are nurses and doctors. His job must be an end in itself, not a rung on a departmental ladder.

I have no first-hand experience of the ordinary run of D.R.O.s; some are no doubt good, some indifferent. What I am sure about is the unvarying excellence of the two hospital-based resettlement officers with whom I have worked over a number of years. I cannot apportion the significance of the character of the men themselves or of

the fact that they are hospital-based in deciding which arrangement is the better. But I am certain of one thing: that there is need for experiment and that in this most important work policy based purely on departmental decree is not good enough. If, in the broadest sense, we are to get value for money this airing of the resettlement of the disabled should be followed by a planned comparative study.—I am, etc.,

H. J. SEDDON

London W.1

SIR,—Disabled men are discharged from this unit after burns, industrial, or road traffic injuries. When they leave they know to what work they may expect to return. They leave as wage earners not as invalids. We owe this state of affairs to Mr. J. W. Daniel (30 October, p. 277), our hospital rehabilitation officer. He sees our patients in hospital as soon after injury as they are lucid, and their employers within days, while both remember the patient as a fit man. Arrangements are made then for his return to the right job, at the right time. His convalescence is a preparation for work, and the return to work the beginning of the best form of physiotherapy and psychotherapy that exists—that is, reward for effort by money rather than by the compliment of a few degrees of added movement.

By contrast district rehabilitation officers fail, and must fail, because they are presented with a man who is already psychologically an invalid and then hopeless. Their liaison with hospital doctors is non-existent. Too often, patients fit for the right job do nothing, because the challenge of something new is too great for them. The district rehabilitation officer is too late to help, often too ill-formed to advise, and too remote to relate. How can he succeed?

Every hospital dealing with trauma should have a hospital rehabilitation officer. With such measures thousands of pounds would be spent and millions saved.—I am, etc.,

ROY SANDERS

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SIR,—The excellent article of Dr. D. A. Brewerton and Mr. J. W. Daniel (30 October, p. 277) prompts me to add the following comments.

I have known Mr. J. W. Daniel since 1959 in his capacity as a resettlement officer in Mount Vernon Plastic Centre. His contribution to our patients was not only to return them to work early. On many occasions both myself and my colleagues have discussed with Mr. Daniel suitability of the particular operative procedure for patients under our care. His opinion based on the detailed knowledge of patients' work requirement has always been invaluable.

I would like to point out one line in their discussion which to me underlines the basic principle: "It is a serious error to think that rehabilitation is a separate process divorced from other medical care."—I am, etc.,

M. F. STRANG

Mount Vernon Hospital,
Northwood, Middx

Sclerosant Injection for Varicose Veins

SIR,—We have recently been concerned with a case of accidental intra-arterial injection of sclerosant during the course of injection compression treatment of varicose veins. In this instance the operator was a skilled vascular surgeon with considerable experience of the method. The varicosities were in the left ankle and lower calf regions. After the first injection had been made on the inner side of the ankle, not far behind the malleolus, the patient experienced a burning pain in the ankle. The toes soon showed signs of ischaemia and though the accident was recognized, and correctly treated by the admission of the patient for infusion of low molecular weight dextran and heparin there was ischaemic damage to the great and second toe and a large slough along the course of the posterior tibial artery proximal to the point of injection. Arteriography subsequently confirmed that the posterior tibial artery was occluded over the area in question and that the lower end of the peroneal was also occluded most probably through the communicating artery not far from the injection point. Whether this injection was into the posterior tibial itself or into the medial malleolar branch is not certain.

The purpose of our writing this letter is to draw the attention of the profession to the risk of injecting varicosities by the empty vein technique or indeed by any other for that matter in the ankle region where arteries may be quite close to the varicosities in question. We understand from colleagues that there have been at least five other cases of similar accidents so we hope that the warning will be recognized as a possible hazard of this otherwise excellent treatment.—We are, etc.,

P. G. C. MARTIN
H. H. G. EASTCOTT

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Manpower and Financial Incentives

SIR,—Mr. F. J. Bramble (*Supplement*, 13 November, p. 34) is reported to have "no doubt that if a financial incentive to attract doctors to unpopular areas was introduced in the hospital service—as happened in general practice—it might be effective." This statement raises the interesting question of whether financial incentives in general practice have in fact resulted in a movement of general practitioners to unpopular practice areas. The results of a large-scale investigation which this unit has just completed into patterns of geographical mobility and residential settlement among general practitioners indicate that the financial incentives which existed from 1966 to 1970 acted as effective inducements under certain limited circumstances, but that non-monetary factors were much more significant in most decisions about where to practise.

Our study, which it is hoped will be published next year, describes in some detail the complex motivations involved in the residential mobility of doctors, and clearly warns against over-simplified prescriptions in manpower planning.—We are, etc.,

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University of Kent at Canterbury

Pupillary Mobility and Skin Colour

SIR,—Your leading article (30 October, p. 252) discusses the interesting work of Emiru,¹ who demonstrated that the pupils of Africans are less susceptible than those of Europeans to the mydriatic effects of homatropine and phenylephrine. However, your description of this research as a "pioneer study" is not correct. Readers may be interested in the study carried out by Obianwu and Rand in 1965² along similar lines.

The mydriatic effect of ephedrine eye drops was compared in European, Chinese, Indian, and African students. It was found that the mydriatic response was inversely proportional to the degree of pigmentation of the iris. There is evidence that this difference is due to a more powerful reflex miosis in subjects with pigmented irises. As suggested in your leading article, this may represent an adaptation to the environment. Since the decreased mydriatic response was observed in Africans residing in the United Kingdom, the adaptation seems likely to be genetic in origin and to have become general through natural selection.—I am, etc.,

A. S. D. SPIERS

Medical Research Council Leukaemia Unit,
Royal Postgraduate Medical School,
London W.121 Emiru, U. P., *British Journal of Ophthalmology*, 1971, 55, 538.2 Obianwu, H. O., and Rand, M. J., *British Journal of Ophthalmology*, 1965, 49, 264.

Crystals in Skeletal Muscle

SIR,—In a recent publication Watts and collaborators¹ and now in your leading article (23 October, p. 185) reference is made to crystals of hypoxanthine, xanthine, allopurinol, and oxipurinol in "muscles of patients with gout who were being treated with allopurinol." The authors do acknowledge that the patients exhibit no symptoms associated with such crystals, and that "allopurinol can still be recommended,"¹ but suggest that studies more prolonged than the 8-9 years now available may be necessary to evaluate their accumulation and effects.

The data, however, show such crystals, not in muscle per se, but in specimens frozen in liquid nitrogen at -196°C or in hexane at -70°C and studied at -20°C . The elementary fact seems to have escaped attention that crystals can precipitate only when the concentration of solute exceeds the solubility point, and that the substances in question have rather high temperature coefficients of solubility. The reported levels of xanthine in specimens from xanthinuric patients may be close to the solubility limits (450 and 315 ng/mg dried tissue² (108 and 75.5 ng/mg wet weight) compared to 200 ng/mg in a saturated solution in plasma at 37°C), and precipitation may be plausible if one is willing to assume somewhat localized concentrations. Similarly, in untreated gouty patients, urate concentrations in muscle may reach levels where precipitation is possible. On the other hand, the concentrations of hypoxanthine, xanthine, allopurinol, oxipurinol, and uric acid in muscle biopsy specimens from allopurinol-treated patients are well below saturation levels in every instance, and only small fractions of the solubility in most instances. Thus, crystals of hypoxanthine are reported by Watts,¹ but